



Do Maps Make Geography? Part 3: Reconnecting the Trace

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This paper was never supposed to be 23,000 words long and split over two, now three, parts. Originally, it was not even supposed to be a paper at all; it was supposed to be a commentary in which I would compare contemporary neighborhood typologies, such as those developed in Cleveland-Cuyahoga and Memphis-Shelby to earlier incarnations of such classifications in 1930s redlining maps, the argument basically being that ‘we’ve been here before’. But as I was writing this piece, I became fascinated by the history of the ideas underlying these classifications. I started to trace the line from the Chicago School of urban ecology/sociology and the Chicago-based real estate lobby to neoliberal urbanism – via New York, Washington DC, Cleveland and New Orleans. As I was doing this, I also became increasingly fascinated by the role of maps in delineating deserving and undeserving places. I started to see a map in a similar way Donald MacKenzie sees an economic model, that is, as *An engine, not a camera* (MacKenzie, 2006); and rephrased the question *Do economists make markets?* (MacKenzie et al., 1997) into *Do maps make geography?* (Aalbers, 2014a; 2014b). Only at that point I was reminded of the edited volume *Rethinking maps* (Dodge et al., 2009) that I, in my capacity of review editor of the Dutch urban planning/studies semi-academic journal *Rooilijn*, had asked one of my colleagues to review a year earlier. It was



from *Rethinking maps* that I started to backtrack the development of critical cartography as a distinct literature within geography and as something that would enrich my understanding of managing urban decline.

Luckily the summer of 2011 was a calm one with few distractions. It was as if I was taking a summer school in critical cartography in which I was the only student and the lecturers expected a lot of self-study. As will become clear from the first part of *Do maps make geography?*, this literature became crucial in making my argument that maps have performative qualities (which is not an entirely new argument, as Wilson [2014] acknowledges). But what may be less clear from that paper is that I was quite surprised how disconnected a great deal of critical cartography is from other literatures within our discipline. Perhaps there is nothing surprising about this – it may be the contemporary nature of academic research and writing. I assume most critical cartographers will easily endorse my argument that other fields of geography have often ignored the method, lessons and critique of the critical cartography literature, but I'm afraid they may not endorse my critique that a great deal of critical cartography has been self-referential; more interested in engaging in a dialogue with other critical cartographers than with other geographers who could fruitfully *use* critical cartography to enrich their methods and understandings of the re/making of space.

In parts 1 and 2 of *Do maps make geography?* (Aalbers, 2014a; 2014b), I have tried to engage with the critical cartography literature, while also contributing to the literatures on neoliberal urbanism, neighborhood decline and shrinking cities. I may not have succeeded in doing so, but it is my hope that the paper will not only be read by critical cartographers but also by urban geographers who may not consider themselves critical cartographers. Perhaps this is naïve and perhaps I should have followed the more common strategy of targeting specific arguments at specific audiences, i.e. one paper contributing to the critical cartography literature, one to the neoliberal urbanism literature, one to the history of ideas, and one to the literature on decline and shrinkage. This would have reproduced the conceptualization of (social) science as consisting of neatly defined disciplines, sub-disciplines and topics. It would have reproduced the kind of simplistic classifications intrinsic to the neighborhood typologies critiqued in parts 1 and 2 of the paper.

In that sense, Matthew Wilson's (2014) invitation to 'map the trace' is a welcome one. In the end, it is not about the maps *per se*; it is about how the construction of maps *contributes* to the construction of place and space. Although some constructivists may disagree, maps do not act but they come into being through acts and are being acted upon. Maps embody power/knowledge and are therefore employed for purposes of social control and oppression. This implies not only that the power of maps needs to be taken seriously but also that maps should not be studied in isolation of other tools of power/knowledge. It was not the maps that divided the city into deserving and undeserving places in the first instance, but maps do contribute to such constructions and divisions. In that sense, I am more

interested in what Wilson labels as ‘what critical cartography *does*’ than in ‘what critical cartography *is*’ (emphasis in original) and Wilson is right in concluding that for me, ‘maps are used as strategies to both manage and enable urban decline’ – but never in isolation from other strategies to manage and enable urban decline.

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